

# THREE STRIKES

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## THREE STRIKES

On Valentine's Day, Harry Meisner stepped off the slowly revolving turntable of a rooftop restaurant and out onto a balcony overlooking the Florida night.

The bay below was silver dotted with darkness. A breeze carried the fragrance of possibilities lost and far away.

Behind him, Celine waited angrily at the table for his return.

The argument, as always, had been about something trivial – in this case, whether he should have shaved again before they left for the restaurant. The underlying issue, however, was anything but trivial – for him, a declaration of independence; for her, an indictment for lack of consideration.

What was the secret? Harry wondered bitterly. There had to be a secret. Not everyone was as unhappy as he was.

One would think that after sixty-one years and three marriages, he would know something more about life.

A little, pudgy, bald-headed man, round as a button, stepped off the turntable and joined him on the balcony with an enigmatic smile.

"You look happy," Harry said accusingly. "Tell me. What's the secret?"

The little button-shaped man looked out onto the gleaming silver bay and said, "Love."

"Easy enough to say," Harry snorted. "But what does it mean?"

"It means," the little man said to the moonlit darkness, "that you care about someone or something else more than you care about yourself."

Harry thought about that for a moment, taken aback by both the seriousness with which the man had fielded his rude inquiry and the simple truth of the response.

"How do you do that?" he asked, now truly anxious for an answer. "How do you care about someone else more than you care about yourself?"

It was something that he was suddenly afraid he had never done.

"That's the hard part," the little man said, finally, perhaps reluctantly, turning towards him. "Somehow it's a lot easier to do with kids and animals. Do you have kids?"

Harry nodded. "Two."

"Do you care about them more than you care about yourself?"

Harry wasn't sure. He wanted to say yes, but he also wanted to be honest with himself.

His kids hated him for leaving their mother, his second wife, for Celine, his third. They thought he was a selfish bastard and told him so to his face the few times after his divorce that they allowed him to see them.

"I used to," he finally said. "Though I guess I didn't act like I did."

The little button-shaped man nodded, then turned back towards the bay.

"Love is a choice," he said to the black velvet air. "Love is something you decide to do. You can always just step off the turntable and out onto the balcony."

"Just like that?" Harry asked.

The little man nodded. "Just like that. The hard part is remembering to do it."

"But why does doing it make you happy? Sorry if I sound like I'm looking for free therapy, but this is my third marriage, and you know what they say."

"No," the button-shaped man said. "What do they say?"

He sounded interested.

"Three strikes and you're out."

"Three strikes and you're out!" the little man repeated, almost gleefully. "Yes, that's good! That's very good!"

Then he dropped his voice, getting back to the matter at hand.

"You feel like you're living in a cage," he said. "When you're alone, you're lonely, and when you're tied to someone, you're tied down. Neither state satisfies you, neither makes you happy."

"Exactly!" Harry agreed.

"What you don't understand is that you're the cage. Not marriage. Not your wife. You."

"And love is the way out of the cage," Harry said, a light flashing.

"Yes. Love of your children, love of your wife, love of God, if you believe in Him."

"The way to get outside the self."

"Yes. And once you're there, you're able to see how beautiful it all is. That's really the reward of love. Beauty. It's the beauty that makes you happy."

He motioned out towards the moonlit view.

"It's like living back there, in that restaurant, nauseous with the constant motion, the going round and round, worrying about the bill, about whether the food is worth the money, about whether the waiter is humiliating you, about how this is Valentine's Day and all the passion and romance in your life is long gone. And then you step off. You stop turning. You see how beautiful everything is, including your love for your wife, which is like music playing in the background that you never listen to and so never hear."

"Yes, that's true!" Harry said enthusiastically. "Everything gets in the way. I do love my wife, I just don't let myself feel it."

The little button-shaped man nodded. "So that's it," he said, throwing his hands out and then slapping them back against his sides. "That's the secret. In the old nutshell."

He laughed and, turning away, seemed to end the conversation in contemplation of the night.

The secret of happiness! Harry thought, also turning away to give the man some well-earned

privacy. He looked south now, down the strip of high rise hotels and condominiums that lined the narrow beach. Far below him traffic ran incessantly up and down the four-lane road that paralleled the shore.

What a fool he had been all his life! Trapped in the cage of his own self-interest!

His first marriage, it was true, had been ridiculously premature. He and his wife were children, both barely 21, obligated by what they had assumed was the other's expectation. A brief, honest conversation before the wedding would have saved them a lot of grief.

All he could think of was: Stuck for life! The one sexual partner he would ever experience. Ever!

He had wanted out right away. His first wife had been totally bewildered by the change in him just a few days after the wedding. Nasty, belligerent, impossible to please. And she lacked the maturity and experience to know what to do with him. Within seven months, the marriage was annulled.

What followed were fifteen years of exuberant bachelorhood, affairs sprinkled with one-night stands, when he could do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, answerable to no one but himself. He later wondered why he had brought that period of his life to a close by remarrying. He had considered it in retrospect the happiest time of his life.

Obviously, something had been missing. Each affair ended badly, with tears on one side and an unavoidable brutality on the other. It had gotten so

that he was reluctant to start an affair for fear of the ugliness at the other end.

Despite himself he had had the wisdom to marry his second wife, a woman with whom he felt unaccountably at home, as though for the previous fifteen years he had been traveling and could at last unpack and put his things where they belonged.

The first few years of that second marriage had been truly his brief bit of happiness. When his children were young, his wife affectionate, and, most important, he had been in love.

But when the passion had cooled a little, he decided to have it both ways – both the freedom of bachelorhood and the comforts of home – simply by cheating on the side. The first time was an experiment, the second a corroboration. By the third, cheating had become a policy, a way of life, unsustainable, as it turned out. Which was something he learned when he met Celine.

Boy, had she been hot! Also in a second marriage, also enjoying a double life. They came upon their affair looking for a recreational binge, but for both it quickly became an addiction. And like any addicts, they courted and found destruction.

Both no longer cared what their spouses knew, or thought about the inevitable consequences of what they were doing. When the explosion came, they married in the wreckage of their lives, as though that were the only alternative left to two aging survivors who had nothing left but each other.

Ghosts haunted both of them, along with the knowledge that what they had sacrificed was far more precious than what they were left with.

Well, it was not too late for Celine, Harry thought. He may have messed up everything else in his life, but this one thing he could still do right.

Love is a choice, the little round button-shaped man had said, which Harry found vastly empowering. He would make the right choices this time. The alternative was an angry and bewildered bitterness that could hardly be called a life.

Breaking through his thoughts was the sound of sirens coming up fast from the south. Harry looked down to see multiple flashing lights pull off the four-lane road and up into the driveway of the hotel.

He looked over to where the little button man had been, but he was gone. Harry was alone on the balcony.

He moved back to the bay view and looked straight down to where an ambulance and two police cars were pulling under the cupola by the entranceway. He saw a crowd around a scoop of flowers jutting out from below the cupola, and in the center of the crowd a body sprawled face down.

Across a short skirt of lawn from the hotel driveway the gigantic bay still sparkled silver in the moonlight, dotted with islands of darkness.